

# *Sketch*

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## Waiting on Terence

Angela Gulick\*

\*Iowa State University

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## WAITING ON TERENCE

The ringing of the alarms alarm no one. Popping my head out of one of the bedrooms that I am cleaning, I quickly skim the action of the corridor. The nurses aides aren't of much use when the alarms screech down the hallway. Our job is to stay out of the way, and I am good at that. I tilt my head to the right and then to the left, seeing if the pitch will change. The sounds are much louder now, and I fight the impulse to put my palms, reeking with Comet, over my ears. Sr. Olivia is ranting in the bathroom, wondering who on earth could be dying at 7:00 in the morning. Like dying at 7:00 in the morning is somehow different, perhaps less considerate than dying at a decent time, say 11:15. No, that would get in the way of morning prayers, wouldn't it? Is any time the right time? She irritates me more than the buzzing of the alarm, and my foot gently pushes the tan oak door of the bathroom shut. It closes with with a hollow sound, but I can still hear her muffled jabbering through the grain. I can't make out any particular words, which I guess is a comfort.

Coming out of the room, my head turns to the south end of the floor. Gut instinct, formed from five months on the job, tells me that Terence is probably in trouble again. For the last four years, the nuns say, Terence's heart has been plagued by attacks, blockages, stoppages, false alarms, and the alarms ring out at all hours. In my own terms, unsophisticated as they are, the woman is 78 years old and has a bad ticker. Simple.

The alarm is momentarily replaced in my ears by the sound of white nurse shoes squeaking against the dark green linoleum. Somewhere on Upper Hall, I hear a cart beginning to roll, it's wheels protesting like stiff joints first thing in the morning. This is surprising. If ever there needs to be a well-oiled machine, it should be the cart with the red and green twitching lights. Lord knows that it is certainly

used enough on this floor.

The feeling of claustrophobia that this place gives me is even tighter than normal. For some reason, I thought that the death and alarms and carts would become ordinary, as ordinary as cleaning the bedpans and ironing the habits. As I look around to Roxy and Joanna, it seems that these events are ordinary for them. Roxy, with the most perfect mauve fingernails I had ever seen, glances up and down the hall looking for orange room lights that have been turned on in the confusion, but mostly she just files away at those nails. Roxy doesn't have the brown emery boards that Mom has; she has some silver number with a pink handle that makes her look like a professional.

At thirteen years old, I'm not much of a professional at anything, least of all at being a nurses aide. Sneaking orange juice out of the tall silver cans distinctly saved for the sisters, I am learning easily how to bend rules. Hospital corners still escape me though. They are real big on hospital corners and clean bathrooms at this place. Cleanliness next to Godliness and all that. I just wish that I didn't have to get next to dirty toilets on such a regular basis.

The toilet stuff is the down side to a job that pays \$2.01 an hour. The upside, usually, is dealing with the people. Mom tells me that I am the only bright spot that some of these women have in their days which doesn't make getting up a 5:45 any easier. Of course, Mom also says that when nuns get mean, they can out-mean just about anyone. Maybe it's all of those years of threatening us to eternal damnation that leaves its mark on them.

With Terence, what leaves its mark on me is her voice. She has the lowest, most resonant voice that I have ever heard. She reminds me more of a big bullfrog, the kind that you hear on a pond but can't pick out from the shadows. Terence hides in the shadows of her private room, usually sitting on a rust-colored Laz-E-Boy with her feet propped up (good for the circulation, she says). As I would walk past her room, out of the dimness would come that

voice. Terence's room is right across the hall from the refrigerators, the tall silver cans of illegal orange juice, so I have been summoned to wait on Terence quite a bit. Terence, however, doesn't seem to respond to my bright spot like Mom said she would. But Mom is right about that meanness business.

"Angela, in here please," the voice would say, accompanied by a dry rustling.

"Yes, Sister?" The fewer words I would use, the fewer chances to be corrected.

"Where's my hand lotion? Over there, look in the drawer...Not the top drawer, the second drawer. Look behind....Find it? Ok, bring it here."

Handing the Keri Lotion with the top opened to her, I watched her hands struggle to squeeze the bottle. The bottle was always kept full so that she wouldn't have to squeeze hard to get a glop, but we had been through this before, so it was just a matter of time before-

"Here, just give me a dose. Not a lot. Oh, now that's too much. Get me a Kleenex. Over there, next to my pillow." Before she finished the sentence, I would be at the ready, blue institution-like tissue in my hands. Working quickly, I would wipe off the excess, trying not to touch her skin if I could help it. This woman could never have enough hand lotion; her skin was dry and raspy, stretched tightly over bulging red knuckles. I threw the tissue away, waiting for the next command.

"Thank you, dear," Terence would say, directing her attention to the latest copy of Leaves magazine. Well, no one could say that she wasn't polite.

The bullfrog voice that I usually hear coming from her room doesn't come this day. The halls seem really dark even though I know that they aren't darker than usual. Occasionally, a nurse's light glows above a doorway in an orange dot. The bedridden sisters are just as curious as I am, asking, "Is Mary still alive" as I make their beds with my crooked corners. They all refer to each other as Mary. They

are sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and as such, they assume Mary's name. It's sort of like a sorority, except that they wear black habits instead of tartan greek letters. In between reports from other nurses aides about Terence, I fold their brown and orange and yellow and green afghans, crocheted by some thoughtful relative, and I brush their thinning hair. Some I even feed. They are scared though, just like me. I am scared because this death stuff is still pretty unknown to me. For them, though, it is all too familiar.

Sr. Dolerice and Sr. Patricia meet in the hallway, dressed in matching avocado housecoats, gossiping and pointing among themselves. Diabetes has made Dolerice (pronounced like Bowl-a-rice, she once told me) a slow mover, so it is Patricia who is dispatched as chief scout to get the latest information. The sounds of Patricia's slippers shuffling and her hushed and nasal whispers as she moves from room to room are more offensive to me than any sound that can work its way out of Terence's tiring lungs. Patricia is firmly lodged in the limelight, savoring every moment of her newly-found status. Even at thirteen, I know that something is wrong here. At a time when I thought that these women would break out into some hymn that was written for these occasions, they are treating Terence's death like the latest soap opera.

"Honey, will you get me some prune juice?" It is Marcie who has snuck up on me in her wheelchair with wheels that never squeak. Marcie wears hand-knitted booties, gray and slate blue, and I can hear, now, the slight shoosh as her feet try to move her chair closer to me.

I try stammering out something intelligent, but end up grunting, "Uh, yeah, stay here." Into the kitchen. Prune juice, prune juice, God, where is it? Why does she need prune juice now? I will just have to worry about it later. Finding a can tucked behind cans of Ensure in the silver refrigerator, I quickly pour her a glass, spilling a drop or two of the brown liquid on my white tennis shoes. I lean against

the chilled metal of the fridge, letting the surface cool my back and the sweat that is pooling there, trapped by my blue polyester smock.

Coming out of the kitchenette, I stand directly across the hall from Terence's room. I give Marcie her juice and just stand there, looking in. Marcie glances but doesn't gawk like I do. Soon, she is wheeling/shuffling back to her room. I don't think to help her. Well, I do, but I don't want to just now.

If I turn my head just so, I can watch what is going on without looking like that is what I am doing. I want so much to enter, this time, and ask Terence if she is feeling any pain, anything special, anything that I can't see or hear or feel with my healthy heart. If Terence's heartbeats correspond with her bullfrog wheezes, then her heart is slowing down. Maybe she is getting tired. I'm tired. After two hours of waiting on Terence, and five months of working here, I'm tired.

I go back into the kitchenette and grab a glass of juice. What the hell, it probably won't be noticed anyway. I work my way back up to the hall to see how Marcie is doing. In her room, Marcie is working on her morning crossword puzzle, chewing the eraser on the top of a short red pencil. She spits something pink out of her mouth. Eraser bits. Just watching her is sort of calming, and I can feel my own breathing slowing down a little. Marcie asks me if I want to help her with the puzzle. "You probably know some of these words, since you do so well in school." Had I ever told her that? It is so tempting just to shut that heavy oak door, shut out everything, and play games with Marcie.

I decline, again being pulled south towards Terence's room. My eyes focus on the light above the doorway, quickly shifting down to the opening itself. By now, a group of sisters has gathered around the threshold, but I am unsure what this means. I move closer, but in my head the air seems to be even thinner, as if Terence, greedy for one last breath to accompany her, has taken it all. The shuffling and

gossiping and questioning has stopped. The space is filled only with the slow, urgent, choking sounds that come out of Terence's body. The sweat that was pooling earlier is a warm wet blotch on my lower back as I lean against the beige tiled wall.

A cluster of sisters, women who don't live on the floor, enter her room, forming a circle around her bed. They begin to mumble, slow and deliberate, fumbling to find the right page of the prayer books that some younger sister has distributed. Dressed purely in black, standing in a circle and repeating words of a language that I don't understand, they remind me of a movie I saw once with a bunch of witches standing around a hole in the ground. I probably shouldn't think that, but I do. In that dimly-lit room, they are a sight. The veils of their habits grace them with the anonymity that they deserve, hiding their faces from people who aren't of the sorority, who can't possibly understand the ritual. I figure that a priest will eventually show up to give last rites; I have learned that much in religion class. Marcie tells me later that Terence had received last rites long ago, when the alarm first sounded, but I stand there, waiting for someone to show, getting more and more uncomfortable with the scene.

The panic and fear that I have been fighting off all morning begin to sting my stomach. I have never thrown up in my life, but I feel like I could now. The youth, maybe the ignorance in me demands that something be done to help Terence. Where are the electrodes, the doctors in white coats? Why only so much black? The dying process, for Terence, has lasted two hours and thirty-six minutes, but the death itself, I suppose, takes only a second. This all seems so simple, so ordinary to the sisters, the other nurses aides, everyone but me. I hate their calm, their quiet acceptance of Terence's death. They don't cry or tell sad stories or call for help. They chant their meaningless phrases and stare down at the bed, and I just watch.

-Angela Gulick